

Some things really do get better with age, like the Missouri Department of Transportation's Highway Gardens. Beginning with a small display in 1922, 80 years later MoDOT now owns and operates one of the most beautiful gardens in Missouri.



By Melissa Black

Photography by Cathy Morrison

Highway Gardens are used heavily throughout the year, not just during the State Fair. The meticulous landscaping and numerous plants make it a popular spot for weddings – more than 30 a year – as well as community events like ice-cream socials and picnics. Various state agencies also hold meetings in the Expo Center.

“I hear a lot of comments from the public about how the Highway Gardens is their favorite spot to visit during the fair,”

Getting Better with

Situated within the state fairgrounds in Sedalia, this 3-acre area is an oasis in the middle of asphalt roads, food stands and carnival rides. The Highway Gardens include an exotic lily pool with native and non-native plants; a rock waterfall; a rustic stone water fountain still cooled by blocks of ice stored beneath the rock; a vine-covered, shaded arbor reminiscent of days gone by; comfortable wood chairs and benches set on lush green grass; plus more than 60 tall, sheltering trees of all varieties, hundreds of shrubs and about 30 different types of flowers.

This year, more than 360,000 people visited the gardens during the 11-day state fair and had the opportunity to marvel at their classic beauty.

“The Highway Gardens are not only a beautiful place for state-fair visitors to rest, but also a great place for MoDOT to showcase all aspects of our department, while meeting with the public face-to-face,” says

Rand Swanigan, MoDOT roadside management specialist in charge of the gardens since 1992.

Besides visiting the Highway Gardens, fairgoers also end up browsing the displays in the Transportation Exposition Center, situated in the middle of the Gardens. Each year during the state fair, the Expo Center features educational exhibits on transportation-related topics about roadsides, new technologies, current safety programs and other timely issues. Staff traditionally hand out the state map and other educational materials free of charge.

This year, to honor the Gardens' eight decades, MoDOT set up a historical display in the Expo Center featuring departmental photos and memorabilia. Other displays included the new No MOre Trash! campaign, the Centennial Tree (otherwise known as the Concordia Oak), work zones, Adopt-A-Highway and *Pathways*. A ceremony was also held to honor the 67 MoDOT employees who have been killed in work-zone related incidents since 1949.



Swanigan says. "The Gardens are truly a part of MoDOT's, the state fair's and Missouri's history. Everyone should come and see them."

So, if you happen to be traveling through Sedalia in the near future, or are looking for a unique wedding backdrop, stop by for a stroll. Otherwise, your next opportunity to see the elderly but elegant Highway Gardens will be at the 101st Missouri State Fair, Aug. 7-17, 2003.



Age

MoDOT's Highway Gardens Turn 80

Highway Gardens Highlights

- 1922** The early version of the Transportation Department participates in the Missouri State Fair for the first time with a display of highway artifacts.
- 1923** MoDOT rents the old sheep and swine pavilion for \$2 (for the entire fair) to display a culvert and blueprints for the new Boonville Bridge. Daily road-condition reports are issued via telegraph.
- 1924** The Missouri State Highway road map is on sale for 25 cents in a tent across from the poultry house.
- 1928** Flowers and shrubs are displayed for the first time. The rental rate for a display area increases to \$200.
- 1929** MoDOT moves to its current location, preserving the few remaining large trees in the fairgrounds. Rental rates double to \$400.
- 1933** MoDOT agrees to maintain fairgrounds roads in exchange for free exhibit-space rental. Fairgrounds roads are listed as Route P, Pettis County under the state supplementary system.
- 1943-44** No fair exhibit due to World War II.
- 1946** The Missouri State Highway Patrol participates.
- 1952** A tornado hits Sedalia during the fair, causing extensive damage to the Highway Gardens and the fairgrounds. One person is killed. A permanent building is constructed for about \$10,000.
- 1964** The building to house Auto, the talking patrol car, is built east of the Highway Gardens.
- 1988** The arbor is constructed and a greenhouse built to house the large volume of flowers required for the Gardens' beds.
- 1992** A 200-year-old English Oak on the Garden's east edge dies and is removed.
- 1994** Major renovations include air conditioning, restrooms and disabled access.
- 1996** The greenhouse is expanded by 9,600 square feet. The State Fair returns to a 10-day format.
- 2002** MoDOT celebrates the 80th anniversary of the Highway Gardens. ■



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